

The Evolving Anti-terrorist Coalition in Southeast Asia: The View from Washington

By Dana R. Dillon

Watching the global war on terrorism from Washington as it unfolds in Southeast Asia one can see that the most important factor in fighting terrorism is not the amount of security assistance provided by Washington and other countries, but the political will of the regional governments and the rule of law. To illustrate my point I am going to focus my remarks on the changing situations in the Philippines and Indonesia, where terrorism has declined in Indonesia but continues to grow in the Philippines, to demonstrate that American and allied assistance is not enough to win the war. It is crucially important that Washington enlist the political will among regional governments.

By examining the development of terrorism, government responses, and the impact of American assistance in these two countries, we can see how political will affects the battle against terrorism.

Indonesia

After the fall of President Suharto, Indonesia was host to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a regional terrorist group with links to al Qaeda and whose size ranged into the tens of thousands. Following the October 2002 bombing in Bali and the increasing evidence of the organization's responsibility for a series of devastating bomb attacks all across the Southeast Asian region, JI was considered to be the most dangerous terrorist group in Southeast Asia. Terrorist activity in Indonesia also included the Free Aceh Movement and a number of other smaller Islamic and ethnic militant groups. As thousands continued dying from terrorist attacks across the Indonesian archipelago, terrorism posed the most urgent yet difficult problem to face the weak Indonesian government.

However, because of the Indonesian military's association with the former dictatorship, its poor human rights record and manifest corruption, American, Australian and Japanese policy proscribed providing security assistance to the military. Instead American, Australian and Japanese assistance focused on training and equipping law enforcement institutions including the police, prosecutors and the judicial system.

While the U.S. was a key player in providing training and assistance to the Indonesian police and in establishing an elite anti-terrorist police force, called Detachment 88, Australia was the most aggressive in pursuing reform and training in Indonesia's police force. After the Bali bombing in 2002, Australia contributed significantly to building Indonesia's counter-terrorism capacity by training Indonesian law enforcement in counter-terrorism and transnational crime, money laundering and the flow of funds to terrorists, and enhancing travel security by strengthening airport, immigration and customs control capabilities.

The most remarkable changes in Indonesia however occurred among Indonesians and its government. In 1998 Indonesia was a corrupt and authoritarian dictatorship propped up by the military. By September 11, 2001 Indonesia's dictator President Suharto had fallen, and Indonesia was still undergoing a painful transition to democracy. At this point, the Indonesian government was still in denial of the existence of terrorists operating in and from the country.

Then came the bombs in Bali on October 12, 2002 that killed over 202 people, mostly foreigners. The Bali bombing was followed by a series of other bombings across the country including key landmarks in the capital Jakarta. This period marked a wakeup call for the Indonesians; terrorism was no longer seen as a foreign or American problem, but a dangerous domestic disease.

Moving parallel to Indonesia's realization that they were the targets of terrorists was a remarkable democratic transition. Few countries can claim to have moved from dictatorship to democracy, unaided, in only six years. By 2004 Indonesia had eliminated the military's appointed seats in the national legislature, separated its military from the police and law enforcement jurisdiction, held nation wide legislative elections, and elected their first directly elected President.

The transformation of Indonesia's terrorist threat has been equally remarkable. Today, JI is significantly weaker, divided and on the run. JI's membership and recruiting have steeply declined. The International Crisis Group characterizes the remaining JI membership as divided, split between a small fanatic core of about 50 people that still want to continue the terrorist campaign and a main body of around 1,000 that cling to the dream of an Indonesian Islamic state, but are reluctant to participate in indiscriminate

terrorist attacks. Almost all of JI's leadership is detained or killed and the Indonesian police keep a close watch on militant offshoots of what's left of the organization. Last year, Indonesian police killed JI's former top bomb-maker, Azahari bin Husin, who was responsible for the second Bali bombing in November 2005. Husin's other chief tactical expert, Noordin Top, is now under intense police pressure and stays on the run.

In addition to defeating JI, President Yudhoyono also successfully negotiated a peace agreement with the Free Aceh Movement, ending one of Indonesia's bloodiest insurgencies and significantly improving security in the Malacca straits. Most of the militant groups that operated in Indonesia have either disappeared or have substantially reduced capabilities.

The Philippines

On the surface the Philippines appeared to be Southeast Asia's most enthusiastically ally in the war on terrorism, but in reality Manila has been a weak and troublesome partner.

The Philippines is a treaty ally of the United States and suffers from its own terrorist problem. President Arroyo invoked the U.S. security treaty and publicly declared that her country was firmly allied with the United States.

In return, since 9/11 Washington provided about \$100 million a year to the Philippines in various aid packages. That figure does not include the cost to the Pentagon for American military training exercises in the Philippines. After the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement was signed in 1998,¹ the U.S. and the Philippines have conducted dozens of joint military exercises, which accelerated in size and duration after 9/11. During the same period, American assistance to Indonesia's counter-terrorism programs totaled only about \$27 million.

Despite this enormous commitment of American resources the Philippine state was dissolving out from under American efforts. Lurching from crisis to crisis, the Philippine government appears incapable of undertaking a long-term counter-terrorist strategy.

¹ US Embassy in Manila. Facts about the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement. January 2006. <http://manila.usembassy.gov/www/hr711.html>

The fault appears to lie, at least in part, with the style and character of the current President. While the 2004 elections in Indonesia strengthened the legitimacy and authority of the state, the presidential election in the Philippines de-legitimized the state and ignited a period of chronic crisis in Manila.

Many Filipinos believe that the 2004 elections were stolen by Arroyo. The release of a tape in 2005, in which Arroyo was caught in a telephone conversation with an election official in an attempt to rig the 2004 election, pulverized her popularity. Soon street protests and calls for “People Power” paralyzed metro-Manila. To preempt yet another extra-constitutional change of President, the Philippine Congress prevented her impeachment, but at the price of Arroyo conceding to a substantial changes to the constitution.

In the meantime, Arroyo’s diminished administration still occupies the Presidency. Her weak presidency is exemplified in her drastic response to a purported coup in February 2006, when state of emergency was declared to protect the Philippine Republic from an alleged “communist-rightist” alliance. While Filipino elites fight it out in Manila the terrorist menace is spreading across the country.

There are three main terrorist groups in the Philippines: the communist New People’s Army (NPA); the Moro Islamic Liberation Front; and Abu Sayyaf; the last being the only group with direct links to al Qaeda. Since 9/11 the Philippines has made no progress against any of these terrorist groups and reports suggest that the terrorist threat is getting worse.

The New People’s Army, which had nearly dropped out of sight after the fall of Marcos in 1986 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, is growing again.

In 2001 the Philippine government negotiated with the MILF with hopes of finding a political solution. The United States was concerned that the MILF was harboring a number of international terrorist and operating terrorist training camps in its territory, but despite these misgivings, Washington supported Manila’s negotiation efforts. Today, Manila and the MILF are still in negotiations and the MILF still harbors and trains terrorist groups.

In the beginning of the war on terrorism, President Arroyo repeatedly vowed to crush the Abu Sayyaf. American-Philippine military operations soon displaced Abu

Sayyaf from its base on Basilan Island and reduced its number from an estimated 1,000 terrorists to less than 250. Despite this initial success, by 2006 the Abu Sayyaf has returned to its former prominence, claiming responsibility for a host of terrorist attacks across the Philippine archipelago.

CONCLUSION

I don't mean to paint the differences between Indonesia and the Philippines as black and white. There is still a considerable amount of gray in both countries. For example, Indonesia has yet to declare Jemaah Islamiyah as a terrorist group; the bloody inter-communal civil war in the Moluccas Islands remains unabated and the Indonesian military operations in Papua continue to aggravate a chronic insurgency. On the other hand, President Arroyo labors inside a constitutional structure that suppresses economic development and diffuses legislative accountability to a degree that practically guarantees demagoguery and corruption. Arroyo's economic policies are killing the Philippine economy with skyrocketing debt and low growth, worsening already difficult social conditions. Nonetheless, Arroyo is not the only President to experience trouble governing in the Philippines.

Fault lies in Washington as well. American counter-terrorism assistance was off target in Southeast Asia. American aid focused only on the Indonesian police largely because the Indonesian military was disqualified by Congress- not because of a comprehensive strategy. Proof is in the Philippines, where American strategy focused on security assistance to the military even though there are fewer police in the country than soldiers.

When one compares results, Indonesia is clearly more successful than the Philippines in counter-terrorism operations. The implications for American strategy are clear as well. The terrorist problem in Southeast Asia is largely an issue of law and order. Hence Washington should focus on strengthening police and other law enforcement institutions and assist the Philippines in their efforts to reform their constitution.